

SAILING FOR THE SOUL



Bereft by the loss of her son, a mother finds solace, friendship and courage learning how to sail

Kyle was killed instantly. Her only boy, her baby, likely felt no pain. The same could not be said for Jo Ann Boussouar. From the moment she learned that her 24-year-old son had died in an Army National Guard training accident in California while prepping for an overseas deployment—the rollover of an M1 Abrams battle tank on the night of Memorial Day, 2017—her pain was as ceaseless as breathing.

Few things touched it. But there was the water, oddly compelling. She was surrounded by it in her home just northeast of Pensacola, Florida; she couldn't really drive anywhere without crossing a bridge—Escambia Bay, Pensacola Bay, Blackwater River. All those sailboats down there, white and effortless, floating gently in all that blue.

"I had been just so sad," she says. "And I would cross the I-10 across the bay, and see the sailboats out there, and I would think, gosh, I want to learn to do that. I didn't know anybody who sailed, I didn't know anyone who even owned a sailboat. I was just thinking, if I could get out there it would help my soul. It would

help with my grief. It would put my mind on something that I was learning. I never really thought I could achieve that goal. I didn't think I could ever do it."

She started reading about sailing. She watched YouTube videos. And she started prowling Craigslist, looking for a small boat she could learn on, pay cash for, keep in a little marina about two miles from her house on the Blackwater River. In April 2019, she found it, a 1975, 22-foot Chrysler that had been owned by a guy who worked in a boatyard and had maintained it well.

It would be a good starter boat for her, the fellow assured her, easy to handle. Forgiving. In honor of Kyle, Jo Ann named her *Gold Star*.

She didn't tell anyone, not Kyle's two older sisters, not his fiancé, Jessica, who'd given birth to their daughter, Devina Jayde, just two weeks before he'd left for California. Not her husband, Hachemi, who was Kyle's stepfather but had practically raised him and was as shattered as she.

"I pulled up with that boat and said, 'Hey, everybody come out and look and see what



Left: Jo Ann Boussouar on her 22-foot Chrysler near her home in Milton, Florida
Right: Her son Kyle, who was 24 when he died.

I've got.' They knew I wanted a sailboat, but they didn't think I was going to buy one."

She started cleaning *Gold Star* up, bought a newer outboard, and she and Hachemi would take her out and motor around. She learned as she went. "One day we were out there, and I said, 'Let's put the sails up.' I had read when the wind is coming across the beam that was the best way for beginners to learn, and you just go back and forth. So, we did. We put the sails up and just went back and forth on a beam reach. And I was like, 'Oh my God, we did it!'"

The marina had few sailboats, but one day, a fellow sailor introduced himself. His name was Roger, and he took Jo Ann under his wing. He found things to improve *Gold Star* and make it easier for her to sail. They took their boats out side-by-side, and he coached her.

"Like he said, 'You need a whisker pole,' and he went and got me a whisker pole," she says. "He had a mentor who helped him learn how to sail, and he's doing this for me because he's trying to pay it forward. He just does this stuff out of the goodness of his heart."

Roger encouraged her to join a local boating and civic club, the Blackwater Pyrates. She met more sailors, took a U.S. Coast Guard safe boating course, and started going on overnight trips with the Pyrates, getting a little farther afield each time, learning new skills all the while. On the first trip, she saw the wind gust up ahead of her and saw Roger's boat heel over. She dropped her sails. Later, Roger asked her why, and she told him she didn't know how to handle the boat in those kinds of puffy conditions.

"He told me what to do. He said, 'Anytime that you get scared, just turn your boat into the wind or let your mainsheet out and you'll spill the wind out, and you'll come right up.' After I learned that, and knowing what to do, that doesn't scare me anymore."

Sailing became a challenge she could meet, a series of goals to attain. At first, she stayed north of the I-10 bridge in Escambia Bay. Then, she wanted to go past that bridge and into Pensacola Bay.



"And when I got up my nerve to do that, I did that," she says. "Then I wanted to go down the Intracoastal Waterway, so we went east on the waterway. And now we have a trip planned to go west on the waterway into Alabama. One day I would like to go out into the Gulf, but right now I just don't have the nerve to do it. I'm not ready for that right now."

She's inspired by reading other sailors' accomplishments on the Facebook page, Women Who Sail. "I live through their stories, you know. I think, maybe someday I could do that. I don't know that I could accomplish the things they do, but one day, maybe."

She's already thinking about a bigger boat, nothing over 30 feet but something with a few more creature comforts. Mostly, she solos, but Hachemi enjoys the boat and is learning too. In late summer, they celebrated their 14th wedding anniversary with an overnight trip to Little Sabine Bay at Pensacola Beach.

"We anchored out and swam, and then we went to one of the restaurants you can dock at and spent the night," she says. "He loved it. He's as much affected about Kyle's death as I am. He was watching me, and he said, 'It is so good to see you smile again.'"

Boussouar, it seems, finds peace when underway. "It's awesome," she says. "The water. The sun. The boat. It's everything. When I see the dolphins, they're just so beautiful. I've yelled to them, and they will come over and then get beside the boat. They look like little ghosts under the water, and you can see them looking at you. It gets my mind off the grief. Just sailing helps me. It's good for my soul." ❧